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THE VIRTUE OF TRUTH.*

BY THE REV. PROFESSOR J. RADFORD THOMSON, M.A.

I. What is meant by Truth?

The words "true," "truth," "troth," "trow," "trust," are all allied etymologically, but the primary root is, according to Skeat, unknown.

The adjective "true" is somewhat ambiguous. It often means faithful, loyal, as when it is said of a man that he is true to his friend; and as in the passage in Shakespeare: "To thine own self be true." It is sometimes used as equivalent to certainty, as in the proverb, "true as death"; and sometimes as correct—according to an acknowledged standard or rule—as in the common expression, "His drawing is remarkably true." Similarly, the substantive noun, "truth" is not altogether univocal, but is employed, in ordinary speech, in different significations.

Truth, strictly speaking, is the quality of a judgment, expressed in a proposition, or statement. A proposition is true when the affirmation or denial agrees with the facts. Thus, if I say, "The earth goes round the sun," or, "The sun does not go round the earth," in either case I am stating a truth. When the word "truth" is so employed its contrary is "error." It would be an error to say, "The sun goes round the earth," or, "The earth does not go round the sun." When language agrees with the conviction of the speaker, and his conviction agrees with the facts of the case, such language is true. As knowledge increases, error is discredited and discarded, and the body of truth is enlarged, to the intellectual enrichment of mankind. Language both embodies and communicates thought. The old saying that the purpose of language is to conceal thought, points, in a cynical way, to a misuse of a great gift.

* A Lecture delivered to the Richmond and Kew Branch of the Parents' National Educational Union.

The virtue of Truth, Truthfulness, Veracity, is the practice, the habit of making a right use of speech, by employing language to express the convictions, the beliefs of the mind. The words men utter are, strictly speaking, part of their conduct; for the tongue is a bodily organ as much as are the hands. And conduct is interesting to the moralist as the expression of character. Because speech is a manifestation of the intellectual and moral life, it is susceptible of approval and disapprobation, of praise and blame. It has moral character, in this respect, among others: it may be truthful and virtuous, or false, and wrong. In order that there may be Truthfulness, there must be two or more intelligent and moral beings, able to use and to understand speech, as the medium of communication among them. Either truth or falsehood may be addressed to one or to many. And these qualities may characterize, not only spoken, but equally written or printed signs or symbols—constituting speech, as it were, at second hand. The very nature of man, as a moral being, renders his speech part of his probation and discipline, whilst his necessarily social condition renders veracity a social virtue and falsehood a social vice. We owe the truth to our neighbours, *i.e.*, we are under a general obligation to speak nothing but the truth—nothing inconsistent with the truth. It must be borne in mind that the essence of falsehood is the intention to deceive. In judging the veracity or untruthfulness of language, we consider the belief of the speaker as to what the hearer—the person spoken to—understands him to believe. A promise is to be kept—not in the sense intended by the speaker—not in the sense understood by the hearer—but in the sense in which the promiser believed, when speaking, that the promiser understood him. Where there is no intention to deceive, and where it may reasonably be presumed that the person addressed will not misunderstand the speaker, language may legitimately be employed which is not literally and accurately true. There are unintentional mistakes and errors of which all are guilty, and into which the most truthful, if not the most accurate, speakers may sometimes fall. Truth must be distinguished from literal accuracy. The contrary of literal, verbal accuracy may often be employed, both in public discourse and in social conversation. I refer to tropical forms of speech, and especially to irony. As very

dull minds may not comprehend such modes of speech, it may be well to speak literally to the literal; but to banish irony from oratory or from our daily talk would be like taking the salt out of our usual diet; and, in fact, irony, hyperbole and paradox are often the most effective means of conveying truth.

What shall be said of the habit of exaggeration? This is often perfectly innocent, and is often amusing. When we hear that a showery day is "horrid," or a cold day "dreadful," when we are told that one course of action is "infinitely" better than another, when obviously nothing more is meant than that the weather is unpleasant, or that one procedure is somewhat or far preferable, the exaggeration is intended merely to raise a smile, if the method is not too stale. Inaccurate and inappropriate as such language often is, it is not falsehood. The same may be said of certain conventional forms of speech, the meaning of which is well understood, and which are not misinterpreted. No one is misled if it be remarked that "the sun rises," or "the dew falls"; or if a servant is instructed to deny a visitor in the phrase "not at home." Yet it must be remembered that, whilst adults are in no danger of being deceived by exaggeration, irony, or conventional misstatements, this may not be the case with children. It may be discreet to avoid such forms of speech in conversing with them, lest confidence in veracity should be shaken. The same caution may not be necessary in the case of simple acting, or (as children say) "pretending." Much of the enjoyment of little children seems to lie in the assumption of characters, and in the use of language involved in such assumption. If a father says to a child, "I am a wolf, or a dog"; or a mother, "I am a milkmaid, or an old grandmother," no harm seems to be done. Simulation seems natural, and is not necessarily dissimulation.

II. Truth is approved and enjoined by all authorities on morals. Moral teachers, of every nation and in all ages, have insisted upon the excellence and beauty of truth—have enjoined it as a duty and have extolled it as a virtue. It is well known that the ancient Persians comprised the education of their youth, physical and moral, in two exercises: they were to be taught to draw the bow and to speak the truth. The ancient Hebrews were instructed as to the virtue of truth

and the sin of falsehood. They were assured that "the Lord is the God of truth": that He "desireth truth in the inward parts." The good man was depicted as one that "speaketh the truth in his heart," who says "nothing but the truth," who is "valiant for the truth." One of the commandments is, "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour"—a requirement of truth in matters of the highest social importance. Plato, in the *Republic*, teaches, through Socrates, that the "true lie" is the ignorance in the soul of him who is deceived, and that "the lie in words is only a kind of imitation and shadowy image of a previous affection of the soul." He adds that a lie in words is, in some cases, useful, and not hateful; as in dealing with enemies, and in mythology and poetry. In another place he tells us that "truth should be highly valued"; and that though the rulers of the State may lie for the public good, a private citizen may not in return lie to the rulers, for such a practice would be subversive of the State.

Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, introduces the virtue of truthfulness as a mean between boastfulness and self-depreciation; but treats the virtue in a general way, and in an elevated moral tone. "Falsehood," says he, "of any kind, considered entirely by itself, and without reference to circumstances, is disgraceful and blameable, while the truth is noble and praiseworthy. . . . We are not herein concerned with him who is truthful in his agreements and bargains, or in those matters which come under the scope of injustice and of justice . . . but rather with him who, where no such question is at issue, is truthful, in his speech and in his life, because it is his character to be such; and a man of this character cannot but be esteemed as good."

The Christian Scriptures contain many admonitions to truth speaking. It may suffice to quote one verse from St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians:—"Putting away falsehood, speak ye truth each one with his neighbour: for we are members one of another."

St. Augustine says:—"Let none doubt that he lies, who utters what is false, for the purpose of deceiving. The utterance of what is false, with a will to deceive, is unquestionably a lie."

The Jesuit moralist, Father Rickaby, thus explains the obligation of truth:—"The peculiar spiritual and moral

inviolability of the connection between word and thought, appears from the consideration of the archetype holiness of God. This then is the real, intrinsic, primary and inseparable reason why lying, or speech in contradiction with the thought of the speaker, is everywhere and always wrong."

Among the morally cultivated, truth is regarded not only as obligatory and as contributive to the well-being of society, but also as beautiful and admirable, and even as a mark of good breeding. On the other hand, untruthfulness is regarded not only as always a vice and sometimes a crime, and as a sin against God, but also as a deformity, a moral degradation, as a fault peculiarly mean and base.

In a court of law a witness is sworn to speak "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth"; and violation of this oath involves punishment and disgrace. But in the ordinary intercourse of life, no fault is deemed amongst us as more discreditable than falsehood. The whole truth is not, indeed, always to be expected; nothing but the truth is obligatory.

But it must not be overlooked that truthfulness is not either practised or praised in all communities, in every nation, or in every grade of society. There are nations where this virtue is little valued, and perhaps even despised. This seems especially the case among subject peoples and among slaves, and it is to be feared that untruthfulness is very common where profit is to be made and where punishment is to be avoided by falsehood. There is an old definition of an ambassador, as a servant of the State who is sent to "lie" abroad for the interests of his country; and it is usually held that in war an enemy has no claim to the truth. In the ordinary intercourse of life the standard of veracity is probably higher than in diplomacy and in war.

III. Why is Truth to be spoken?

A question naturally occurs to many minds, which is of theoretical, speculative interest rather than of practical importance:—What is the ground of the obligation to speak the truth? Why is truthfulness a virtue? To this question different schools of moralists return different answers, which, however, may not be so inconsistent with one another as is often assumed. The metaphysician will say that truth is binding, because it is in harmony with the nature of things,

the fitness of relations, the constitution of the moral universe, the dictates of Eternal Reason, or Natural Law. The theologian may base the obligation of truth upon the will and commandment of the just and omnipotent God. The ethical psychologist may find the authority, attaching to veracity, in the approval of the moral sense, or of conscience, whether that faculty be native and simple or acquired and composite. The utilitarian may commend and enjoin truthfulness, as a moral habit which is advantageous to society and promotive of general happiness. The legal-minded man of the world may look with disfavour upon certain kinds of falsehood as forbidden and punishable by law, *i.e.*, by the State. Some students may regard truth as in itself a primary obligation, and others may conceive of it as one form of binding justice, *viz.*, that form which relates to speech, an important expression of character and medium of social intercourse.

These are all matters of interest to the thinker, but their consideration is not vital to our present purpose.

(To be continued.)